

Happily Ever After

Fairy Tales,
Children,
and the
Culture
Industry



Jack Zipes

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*Fairy Tales, Children,
and the Culture Industry*

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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

*To Thomas Hoernigk,
good friend and mensch*

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Acknowledgments

For the past three years I have been exploring the interconnections between the oral folk tale, the literary fairy tale, and the fairy tale as film, and many of the essays in this book stem from talks that I delivered on this topic in England, Ireland, and the United States during this period. Two of the chapters were first published in *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*. They have both been completely revised and expanded for this book.

As I worked on these essays, I benefited a great deal from the suggestions and critical advice of Cary Bazalgette, Nancy Canepa, and Catherine Vellay-Vallantin. In addition, Marina Warner and Rüdiger Steinlein have been especially helpful in elucidating complex issues in the historical development of the fairy tale. As usual, I have relied on Bill Germano and Christine Cipriani for their sound advice and guidance, and I have profited greatly from the careful copyediting of Connie Oehring.

The present study was not conceived as a book, and yet the essays were written to address my ongoing interrelated concerns about the socialization of children, the impact of the fairy tale on children and adults, and the future development of the fairy tale as film. At the same time, my interest in storytelling has increased, and I have sought to explore the renaissance of storytelling in general and its relationship to the culture industry's effect on story. As a result of analyzing the historical trajectory of storytelling and the

literary fairy tale, the essays in this book move from the sixteenth century to the present, between different cultures and societies, and from specific analyses to general syntheses that are often somewhat provocative and speculative. In the end, I hope that the common threads of my arguments are woven carefully enough to clarify why I believe that fairy tales in all their forms have such profound meaning in our pursuit of happiness.

Introduction

No social scientist need prove a direct effect on children's behavior for some of us to hate the bullying, conformist shabbiness of the worst pop and the way it consumes our children. If children are living in pop culture, and a good part of it is ugly and stupid, that is effect enough; the sheer cruddiness is an affront.

—David Denby

As children, we all hear fairy tales and read our lives into them. But we also want to see and realize our lives as virtual fairy tales even as we grow older. We never abandon fairy tales. So it is not by chance that the fairy-tale film has become the most popular cultural commodity in America, if not the world. In recent years such films as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Never Ending Story II*, *The Lion King*, and *Aladdin* have earned millions of dollars and entertained millions of viewers, not to mention the re-releases of such classics as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Pinocchio* and the hundreds of fairy-tale films made for the video market, such as *The Return of Jafar* and *Aladdin and the King of Thieves*, and fairy-tale films produced for television, the most prominent being Ron Koslow's 1986 series *Beauty and the Beast*. If we include live-action films such as *Splash*, *The Princess Bride*, *Pretty Woman*, *Into the West*, and the hundreds of sentimental films that rely on the fairy-tale structure in which a magical transformation or miraculous event brings about a satisfying, happy ending, we could possibly argue that Hollywood itself as an industry and a trademark is inseparable from

the fairy tale. In fact, Hollywood as a symbol is a utopian fairy-tale destination, a place where the good fairy as destiny waits to transform unknown talents into known stars, where fortunes are made, where, like the enchanted forest, something special happens that brings genuine happiness to the true in heart.

But Hollywood—like other centers of the entertainment industry in the United States and Europe—is also a hard and cruel place. The people who first built up Hollywood always knew it, and everyone who works in entertainment in Hollywood today knows it too. Like the Wizard of Oz, Hollywood “producers” rely on illusion to impress audiences and to maintain the fiction of Hollywood as utopia. Perhaps this is one reason that filmmakers were attracted to the genre of the fairy tale from the very beginning. Knowing full well that they could not provide happiness in or through their films, they needed true and tested stories to continue framing and narrating the wish-fulfillments of all classes of people to give them hope—and, of course, to make some money in the process.

It would be simplistic, however, to attribute the adaptation of folk tales and fairy tales to the screen to the materialist interests of early-twentieth-century filmmakers. If anything, these filmmakers were more enthralled by the dazzling technology of making films, whether animated or live-action. Certainly they also wanted success and fame, and many of their own lives read like Horatio Alger stories that are not unlike fairy tales. But just as important as notoriety and money was the challenge of resolving technical and aesthetic problems in producing films so that the images on the screen would be more effective in creating the illusion of possibility and actuality. Early filmmakers took great joy and pride in the discovery of the appropriate forms, shapes, movements, and constructions that would best give expression to the genius of their invention. Fairy tales were incidental to their work. Filmmakers did not realize how rich and compelling fairy-tale material really was until the 1930s—coincidentally, just as the great economic Depression was shaking most of the world and causing widespread misery; just as fascism of all kinds was on the rise. The fairy tale was to speak for happiness and utopia in the face of conditions that were devastating people’s lives all over the globe. Perhaps this utopian message

was why Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was such a great success in 1937.

Yet the fairy tale was not used consciously in the 1930s to provide an opiate for the people. Cinematic adaptation and transformation of the literary fairy tale was a gradual process that began in the 1890s with the innovative experiments of Georges Méliès and continues today with many significant ramifications and a range of complex meanings. Few critics have bothered to explore how the rise of the cinema affected the fairy-tale genre and how the function of the fairy tale as a literary genre shifted and was altered with the rise of the fairy-tale film and the development of the culture industry from the late 1920s to the present.

To write about the historical transformations of the fairy tale means writing about struggles over voice, storytelling, and the socialization of children. If, in fact, the fairy tale emanated from an oral tradition in which small groups of people interacted with a storyteller, generally a member of the group, who responded to their needs and demands, then this narrative form, while not "pure" folk art, did have immediate significance for the teller and hearers, representing their belief systems and tastes in a voice or voices with which they identified. Such tales were never owned or copyrighted, though it was easy for members of particular groups or communities to recognize the "properties" of a specific tale—to call it their own. As an oral form, the fairy tale was always one among many different oral genres; it was never categorized as a "children's" genre. Nor was it regarded as a genre for children when it was appropriated by educated upper-class writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Italy and France. The literary fairy tales of Giovan Francesco Straparola, Giambattista Basile, Mme. D'Aulnoy, Charles Perrault, Mlle. L'Héritier, Mlle. de La Force, and others were complex symbolic social acts intended to reflect upon mores, norms, and habits organized for the purpose of reinforcing a hierarchically arranged civilizing process in a particular society. This formative civilizing character of the genre is also quite apparent in Shakespeare's fairy-tale plays such as *The Tempest* as well as in the operas and ballets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In other words, literary fairy tales appropriated oral folk

tales and created new ones to reflect upon rituals, customs, habits, and ethics and simultaneously to serve as a civilizing agent. The fairy tale demonstrated what it meant to be beautiful and heroic and how to achieve “royal” status with the help of grace and good fortune. In addition, for many readers of that time, to read or listen to a fairy tale provided a means to distance themselves psychologically from their present situations and to be transported to a magical realm. To read a fairy tale was to follow the narrative path to happiness.

The literary voice was anonymous—and specific at the same time. Readers knew who the author was, but they did not know what the author represented or why he or she wrote the tale. They could not question the author as they could a live storyteller. The author of a literary fairy tale was mysterious, even as his or her work was becoming standardized and familiar. The works of fairy-tale writers became institutionalized during the eighteenth century, and audiences came to expect and demand certain kinds of structures, topoi, motifs, and characters in fairy tales as they formed a literary institution. Not all fairy tales were the same at the time that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Andrew Lang, and others made the fairy tale a popular genre in the nineteenth century. But they were all structured similarly to promise happiness if one could “properly” read their plots and symbols, even when tragedy occurred.

Proper reading, of course, became a key in the nineteenth century, and it was in the nineteenth century that the fairy tale experienced a split; it became schizoid. (Of course, we must keep in mind that the oral tradition was still alive and active and interacting with the literary tradition during this period.) Throughout the nineteenth century in Europe and North America, well-intentioned publishers, clergymen, educators, and parents began discussing “proper” reading material for children and setting criteria for stories that were considered beneficial. At first, fairy tales were regarded as dangerous because they lacked Christian teaching and their symbols were polymorphously meaningful and stimulating. But by the beginning of the nineteenth century, fairy-tale writers had learned to rationalize their tales and to incorporate Christian

and patriarchal messages into the narratives to satisfy middle-class and aristocratic *adults*. For example, the Grimms purposely changed their fairy tales between 1819 and 1857 to make them more instructional and moral, and other writers worked to create tales more appropriate for children, not realizing that often, in seeking to protect children, we harm them most. Andersen, Wilhelm Hauff, Ludwig Bechstein, George Cruikshank, and Mme. Ségur are among the writers who sought to sweeten tales and to direct them at children in a wholesome fashion. At the same time, many writers during the latter half of the nineteenth century, such as George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll, and Oscar Wilde, used the fairy-tale-for-children form to question the overly didactic tales. The result in Western countries was the split and the commodification of the fairy tale. The split was complicated because the divide was not only between the literary fairy tale for adults and the wholesome tale for children, but also between “proper” and “improper” traits. One thing was clear—the “proper” fairy tale for children had become a hot commodity used expressly to socialize children in families and at schools.

Enter the radio and the film.

Both radio and film continued the literary tradition of separating the fairy tale for children from that for adults. However, it is quite clear that by the onset of the twentieth century, the fairy tale had become the predominant literary genre for middle-class children, especially preadolescent children, and it was also *family fare*. The entire family could read, listen, and view a fairy tale at the same time, and each member could “get something out of it.” The crucial question in the early part of the twentieth century—one that is still pertinent—was how to package the tale to attract the largest audience: as book, radio program, or film. Once again, in radio and film the narrator’s voice-over was both anonymous and specific. The voice was characteristically gentle, whether male or female, soft but assured, always promising that happiness would be achieved in the end. One need only listen to the voice in Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* or the CBS radio broadcasts of *Let’s Pretend* with Nyla Mack during the 1940s. The voice-over is a governing voice, but it is not always needed, for the narrative

itself carries an ordering voice, in dialogue, as we have learned from Bakhtin, with other voices.

There would seem to be something totalitarian about the manner in which the voice of the early oral fairy tales was stolen from real, live “people,” appropriated through literature and used by corporations seeking to profit from our fantasies and longing for happiness. However, this kind of argument is facile and one-dimensional, emanating from a mechanical and deterministic view of human nature and history. Though there are certainly “totalitarian” aspects of the transformation of the fairy tale, it is more important to grasp the *diverse* ways in which the fairy tale as a genre has been used. The fairy tale has not only been conceived and exploited to manipulate children and adults, it has also been changed in innovative ways to instill hope in its youthful and mature audiences so that no matter how bad their lives are, they can still believe that they can live happily ever after.

The crucial question is how the culture industry compromises our notion of the pursuit of happiness gleaned from fairy tales. In what explicit and implicit ways must the culture be represented as ultimate authority and power, in much the same manner that Louis XIV, the Sun King, commanded his own representation in fairy tales written by Charles Perrault, Mme. D’Aulnoy, and others during the *ancien régime*? How did a specific rationalist aesthetics develop in the seventeenth century and make its way into the fairy-tale films of the twentieth-century culture industry?

In the twentieth century the creation of fairy tales in all their forms; their effective use by individual artists, corporations, and institutions; and their reception by different audiences take place within the culture industry. Simply put, all art, whether high or low, is subject to commodification, and this commodification has no other purpose than to capture and play upon—in order to profit from—our desire for pleasure and happiness. In order to maximize profit, the culture industry has to instill standard expectations in audiences so that they think they are getting what they want, and that by getting what they supposedly want, they can become like the stars with whom they identify. When accused of “dumbing down” their programs and products, corporate representatives in

the culture industry are fond of announcing that they are conceding to the wishes of the public and are only as guilty as their audiences. Of course, they never mention that they seek to control these audiences through their own polls and conditioning processes. The culture industry is indeed “totalitarian”—perhaps one should use the word *global* today, given the globalization of corporate capitalism—in its intention to totally take over markets and dominate demands and wishes. Whether it completely succeeds is another question, and whether it “totally” infiltrates our lives is debatable. For David Denby, who has written a superb essay about this topic in the *New Yorker*, the situation for children is practically hopeless. “Sold a bill of goods from the time they are infants,” he explains, “many of today’s children, I suspect, will never develop the equipment to fight off the system of flattery and propitiation which soothes their insecurities and pumps their egos. By the time they are five or six, they’ve been pulled into the marketplace. They’re on their way to becoming not citizens but consumers. It was not ever thus. Our reality has changed. The media have become three-dimensional, inescapable, omnivorous, and self-referring—a closed system that seems, for many of the kids, to answer all their questions.”¹

In contrast, it has become common among celebrators of popular culture such as John Fiske, Dominic Strinati, and many others to criticize Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the originators of the concept of a “culture industry,” by pointing to the myriad ways in which common people make use of all kinds of commodities in guerrilla ways to liberate themselves and to develop subversive forms of culture that enable them to take control of their lives. Certainly there is some truth in what these critics say, but I fear that they exaggerate the “liberating” potential of commodified culture and the conscious autonomy of “the people,” whoever they are supposed to be. Too often it seems to me that Fiske and other celebrators of popular culture fail to grasp how early the media penetrate the lives of children, how strong is the referential system of the culture industry, and how it sets the terms for socialization and education in the Western world. Cultural institutions in the twentieth century are centered around profit, power, and pleasure

through power. It is how we learn about and make use of power strategies that gives us some sense of autonomy and pleasure. Popular culture is a myth because we cannot assume that what emanates from “the people” is theirs, that is, an expression of their authentic desires or wishes. These desires and wishes are not ours—even when we think they are or would like them to be—because we tend to forget what the culture industry does to our children and ourselves.

It is strange that in studies of popular culture, critics generally exclude children when they talk about “the people” who consume all sorts of cultural artifacts or make liberating use of them. Most studies of popular culture do not deal with children or with products expressly conceived and manufactured for children. Children are not popular in studies of popular culture, or in courses taught at the university. The intersections between so-called children’s art and adult art are rarely studied. In fact, it is commonly known, despite substantial achievements in the field, that children’s literature is given short shrift at the university as “kiddie lit,” and it is hardly ever included in popular studies or cultural studies programs. It is as if the socialization of taste and the cultural artifacts of childhood have little or nothing to do with the manner in which we appreciate and make use of culture as adults. It is as though the games children play, the books they read, and the stories they tell have not already been influenced by the culture industry and will not play a role in their cultural lives as adults. Though great gains have been made at our universities in interdisciplinary studies, there is still a great deal of compartmentalization and specialization that narrow our perspective. And, of course, I am not talking only about the university.

In studying the fairy tale it is impossible to discuss the genre without opposing such compartmentalization; without investigating the intersections of oral, literary, audio, and electronic forms of the fairy tale; without examining the civilizing processes in different cultures, the formation of families, and the institutionalization of genres. But more to the point, especially in this book, it is crucial to grasp when and why children became the focus of fairy-tale writers and filmmakers and what role the fairy tale plays as lit-

erature, film, audiocassette, and electronic story in the lives of both children and adults. Though the traditional fairy tale has been greatly commodified, and though our lives appear to be continually governed by market demands and cost efficiency, new forms of fairy tales and storytelling have not been proscribed or prevented from emerging. Nor are we as subjects bound to be homogenized, our identities totally determined as types of commodities by the market demands and conditions of the culture industry. In fact, there have always been and still are many sites and signs of resistance inside the culture industry and on its margins.

Though I do not want to privilege the fairy tale as "cultural institution," it is uncanny how much we turn to this genre in all its forms to pursue our identities and the happy fulfillment of our goals, sometimes resisting and sometimes conforming to the rules of the culture industry. In this pursuit we use fairy tales as markers to determine where we are in our journey. The fairy tale becomes a broad arena for presenting and representing our wishes and desires. It frequently takes the form of a mammoth discourse in which we carry on struggles over family, sexuality, gender roles, rituals, values, and sociopolitical power. Writers stake out their ideological positions through fairy tales. For instance, such best-selling books as Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990), Clarissa Pinkola Estés's *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1993), and James Finn Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (1994) use the fairy tale to raise highly significant questions about social and political conditions, which reach broad audiences throughout the world. The authors, whose intentions vary a great deal, touch upon sensitive chords of the temper of our times, and their works are written and marketed to play upon the theme of the happiness that avoids us. Consequently, they have drawn remarkable responses in the form of parodies by other authors, such as Alfred Gingold's *Fire in the John: The Manly Man in the Age of Sissification* (1991) and Barbara Graham's *Women Who Run with the Poodles: Myths and Tips for Honoring Your Mood Swings* (1994) as well as serious essays in magazines and journals.

These writers of best-selling books are not the only ones to

channel their ideological views through fairy tales. In the past three years alone, fifty or more fairy-tale books have been published in the United States which re-create traditional fairy tales in order to address contemporary social problems. For example, Robin McKinley's *Deerskin* (1993) is a fascinating psychological exploration of Charles Perrault's "The Donkey-Skin"; Vivian Vande Velde's *Tales from the Brothers Grimm and the Sisters Weird* (1995) purports to "fracture" many of the Grimms' tales along the same lines explored by Jim Henson in his Muppet films and Edward Everett Horton in the television series *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*; Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling have edited three significant anthologies, *Black Thorn, White Rose* (1993), *Snow White, Blood Red* (1994), and *Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears* (1995), which contain unusual contemporary versions of classical tales by some of the most gifted fantasy and science fiction writers in the United States; and Barbara Walker's *Feminist Fairy Tales* (1996) is a collection of twenty-eight familiar folk and fairy tales from an explicit feminist perspective with didactic overtones. These books are for young and old readers. They are "crossover" books, and if I were to focus on the other fairy-tale books published specifically for children in the past five years, I would have to discuss a few hundred that either alter classical fairy tales according to contemporary viewpoints as to what is proper for children or create new fantastic stories that question the very notion of propriety in language and behavior.

Even more appealing to children are fairy-tale films, which take precedence over literature. I do not mean that children do not read fairy tales anymore or have tales read to them. Rather, children are more readily exposed to fairy-tale films through television and movie theaters than through books—it is important to remember that fairy-tale books are too expensive for most children to purchase, and if they read fairy-tale books at a young age, most will do it at school or through a public library. Nonetheless, children are continually exposed to fairy tales through reading, viewing, and listening. They are encouraged to sort out their lives through fairy tales, but too often they are served up the classical models of

Perrault, the Grimms, and Andersen or the contemporary equivalent in a Disney film that reinforces the patriarchal and consumer tendencies of the culture industry. Resistance to these models does not have to take the form of “politically correct” books, as I have tried to demonstrate in the anthology *The Outspoken Princess and the Gentle Knight* (1994), but rather occurs in tales that help young people question the familial and social standards that they are expected to respect and in tales that excite their imaginations and encourage them to explore their environments and to learn to make moral and ethical choices through involvement in challenging narratives.

Of course, storytelling through books and film is only one way that children can be induced to become their own decisionmakers and creators. Oral storytelling has never ceased, and it continues to play a significant role in our lives. Unfortunately, most university courses and studies of literature seem to imply that oral storytelling ended with the rise of the printing press, or that if it did not end, it has become insignificant in our lives. We know this idea to be untrue, but most university literature courses—except for courses on folklore—rarely take the connections between oral storytelling and literature into consideration. Obviously, the connections are extremely difficult to trace, and such investigation requires some training in anthropology, ethnology, and communication. Yet it is an important undertaking, especially given the renaissance of storytelling in the Western world. Storytelling and fairy-tale associations such as the National Storytelling Association in the United States, the Society for Storytelling in the United Kingdom, or the Europäische Märchengesellschaft in Germany, to name but a few, have proliferated and, during the past fifteen to twenty years, have helped to develop an interest in storytelling in schools, theaters, libraries, hospitals, and old-age homes, as well as in therapy situations, with a focus on “recapturing” the live person-to-person storytelling relationship.

In my opinion this renaissance is part of a reaction to the commodification of folk culture in a world of technology and is connected to folklore and folklorism. The renowned German folk-

lorist Hermann Bausinger regards folklore as a counterworld because it implies a search for nature at a distance from conventionalized etiquette—it is connected to traditions that emanate from particular groups of people, are kept alive by these groups, and are not bound by convention. On the other hand, Bausinger maintains that folklorism “is a ‘secondary, administered folk world,’ ... it is effective because it has the semblance of the nonadministered, the original, the spontaneous, the naturally evolved.”² Examples of folklorism are the imitation of folklore for commercial purposes; the creation of fictitious rituals through the making, wearing, and selling of “peasant,” primitive, or ethnic artifacts, costumes, jewelry, furniture, and so on; the re-creation of folk rituals through dancing, song, and music that are put on display and are alleged to represent the “true” spirit of a particular ethnic group; the return to indigenous crafts as a hobby, such as the making of quilts, furniture, and costumes. In the case of storytelling, folklorism can be identified in storytellers who dress up in “native” costumes or assume the guise of an authentic shaman or wise person and endeavor to re-create the “genuine” tone and ritual of a storyteller of the past. Obviously there is something escapist and phony in such a retreat to the past. But Bausinger poses an important question here:

Are there not attempts at humanizing, at a new self-determination and spontaneity, contained in the retreat to forms of former folk culture which are often preindustrial in origin and structure? This question should not be simply ignored. It definitely renders an essential motif of folklorism tangible—the need to escape from a world that has become extremely unintelligible and unwieldy into a realm that is intelligible, manageable, and familiar. But here, too, appearances are deceptive when it comes to the fulfillment of such needs. What appears as an enclave of the authentic (relative to objects this again means as a relic) is in reality most often contrived, organized, prepared, and at the very least “cultivated.”³

In each country of the Western world the resurgence of storytelling is manifesting itself in different ways that reflect the

currents of folklorism and folklore. In the United States, for instance, many ethnic minority groups are endeavoring to use storytelling to recover their history and to keep rituals alive in a dynamic way. Storytellers create family sagas out of their personal experiences, research different types of tales and retell them in highly dramatic ways, put on performances for children in schools. There are storytelling festivals, workshops, classes, and demonstrations. There are professional and amateur storytellers, and there are people who know how to weave great stories without even realizing that they are relating certain types of tales that “experts” like to record and study. Yet all of this ferment in storytelling has gradually been manipulated by different groups until the dominant associations, influenced by the totalizing features of the culture industry, endeavor to control and decide what is good storytelling and how storytellers should be. The professionalization of storytelling has led to a situation that is very different from preliterate days, when the sharing of rituals, news, and wisdom was at the heart of storytelling, generally without a fee and without concern about copyrighting one’s material.

Given the fact that storytelling can be profitable, many storytellers in Western societies make use of fairy tales because they know that children respond well to this genre. Moreover, they do not have to worry about obtaining permission for performing classical folk and fairy tales. Professional storytellers must worry about such matters, and they must know how to market themselves and their tales. Hence their attitudes toward their material and toward their audiences undergo a shift to the economic, to the commercial, and a story becomes a vehicle for achieving notoriety. For them, the fairy tale is not only about happiness; it is their means to obtain a modicum of happiness themselves.

But what about the children in their audiences? What about the adults? Are we to believe that their fairy tales will make a greater difference for us than the fairy-tale films in movie theaters, on television, and on our computer screens? Where do we go from here with all of these fairy-tale films and professional storytellers reacting with a vengeance against technology that might be misplaced?

Why all this fuss about fairy tales? Can fairy tales influence and change our lives?

I am tempted to say, "Read this book and you will find out," but I hear myself echoing those dazzling television commercials that encourage us to use a certain type of shampoo so that we can turn into handsome princes or beautiful princesses and live happily ever after.

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